

Exhibit 1

He Threw ‘Spaghetti at the Wall’ for Trump. Now He’s After a Top Job.

If Donald Trump wins the presidency, Richard Grenell hopes to be secretary of state. But his work raises questions, even from his former boss.



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Reporting from Washington

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Richard Grenell’s quest to be secretary of state in a second Trump administration began late on Election Day in 2020, when the defeated president dispatched loyalists to run shambolic “stop the steal” operations in battleground states.

President Donald J. Trump tapped Mr. Grenell — his combative former ambassador to Germany, acting national intelligence chief and special envoy to the Balkans — to fly by private plane to Nevada, where Mr. Grenell ensconced himself, his dog Lola, lawyers and a crew of activists in a suite at the Venetian Resort, which served as the group’s war room in Las Vegas. In a days-long spectacle, the Trump team filed a lawsuit and aired false accusations of fraud, including one wrongly implicating hundreds of members of the military.

It was all a sham. Mr. Grenell told the team in the war room, two G.O.P. operatives recalled, that the Nevada vote was not, in fact, stolen. The operatives, who asked not to be named for fear of reprisal from Mr. Grenell, said he told the team that the goal was simply to “throw spaghetti at the wall” — the operatives described Mr. Grenell making a theatrical tossing gesture as he spoke — to distract the media from calling Nevada while the election battle in neighboring Arizona played out.

In retrospect, one of the operatives said, the House committee investigating the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol should have subpoenaed everyone in the room, including the operative himself.

Mr. Grenell declined to be interviewed on the record, though he said in an email that he was going to “do what I want with the final product to correct the record and show the mistakes.”

This article is based on interviews with 40 people, including nearly three dozen Republicans. Most asked for anonymity because they did not want to harm their chances of roles in a future Trump administration or to unleash the wrath of Mr. Grenell, who frequently savages those he disagrees with on social media. One Republican former operative said that after a recent disagreement, Mr. Grenell combed five years’ worth of the operative’s tweets to fuel an online attack that lasted for weeks.



Richard Grenell speaking at the White House as a Serbia-Kosovo policy adviser in 2020. While in the role, Mr. Grenell proposed renaming a reservoir bridging Kosovo and Serbia “Trump Lake.” Anna Moneymaker for The New York Times

To his detractors, Mr. Grenell is a caustic opportunist of modest achievement who scaled the heights of an administration in which pit bull partisanship was prized. Susan E. Rice, President Biden's former domestic policy adviser and a former national security adviser to President Barack Obama, has called him "one of the most nasty, dishonest people I've ever encountered." Brad Chase, Mr. Grenell's former business partner, who fell out with him over his conversion to Trumpism, said he was a "soulless, shameless sellout."

To his supporters, Mr. Grenell is a loyal, tireless messenger for Mr. Trump who transmits the former president's demands with an efficient bellicosity that stifles naysayers.

"President Trump trusts him as a pair of safe hands in deconstructing the administrative state and confronting the deep state," Stephen K. Bannon, the former Trump strategist and host of the "War Room" podcast, said in a brief interview. "There's so much that's got to be taken apart and jettisoned."

Either way, several people close to the former president say that Mr. Grenell has a good chance of landing a top foreign policy job in a second Trump administration — if not as secretary of state, which requires Senate confirmation, then perhaps as national security adviser, which does not. They note that Mr. Grenell has spent the past three and a half years leveraging his Balkan contacts in business ventures, including with an important partner — Jared Kushner, Mr. Trump's son-in-law — and that he brings a bombastic bravado to American diplomacy held in high regard by the former president.

"If you want to avoid war, you better have a son of a bitch as the secretary of state," Mr. Grenell said in a March episode of "Self Centered," a current events podcast. America needs a "tough" chief diplomat, he said, "who goes in to these tables and says: 'Guys, if we don't solve this here, if we don't represent peace and figure out a tough way, I've got to take this file, go back to the United States and transfer it to the secretary of defense, who doesn't negotiate. He's going to bomb you.'"

Privately, Mr. Grenell has on occasion implied to former Trump administration colleagues that the secretary of state job has been promised to him, although two people in Mr. Trump's inner circle say such certainty from any job seeker is premature.

One person close to Mr. Trump said the former president has raised questions about Mr. Grenell's communications work for foreign clients, prompted by Mr. Grenell's Balkans work and a request from him last year that Mr. Trump meet President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey.

Concerns over conflicts of interest might seem ironic coming from Mr. Trump, who used the presidency to benefit his businesses. But the person close to Mr. Trump cited two conversations in which the former president said that he does not like his advisers traveling the world making money from their association with him.

Still, Mr. Trump talks to Mr. Grenell regularly, and a year and a half ago was heaping praise on his pugilistic loyalty. "Ric Grenell: a fighter," Mr. Trump said in Arizona in October 2022. "We have a great, great man. A great fighter. He's got a lot of future."

'I Get to Make Money'

Mr. Grenell has since been busy in the Balkans. He has made plans with Mr. Kushner for a luxury hotel, apartment complex and museum in Belgrade, the capital of Serbia, on the site of the 1999 NATO bombing that destroyed the headquarters of the Yugoslav Army. He is also developing two other luxury tourist sites, one on an Albanian peninsula and the other on a Mediterranean island off the Albanian coast.



Mr. Grenell in Belgrade, Serbia, in 2020. In addition to real estate ventures, his connections to the Balkans flow through the right-wing outlet Newsmax, where he is an analyst and executive. Andrej Cukic/EPA, via Shutterstock

“I’m working on projects, private equity projects, that I get to make money on,” Mr. Grenell said in a television interview in Albania last year. “No one should ever apologize for wanting to make money.”

Mr. Grenell’s connections to the Balkans also flow through the right-wing outlet Newsmax, where he is an analyst and vice president for international development. Last year, Newsmax entered into a multiyear agreement with Telecom Serbia, the Serbian state carrier, to broadcast Newsmax content in Eastern Europe. Newsmax said in a statement that Mr. Grenell was not involved in the negotiations over the deal.

Mr. Grenell has also teamed up with an arms dealer and former Newsmax pundit, John Cardillo, to explore ammunition manufacturing opportunities in the Balkans, according to two people they told about their venture. Mr. Cardillo, whose company is called M42 Tactical, was recently sued for allegedly pocketing nearly \$200,000 he was paid by a Ukrainian émigré, Michael Bogachek, to supply body armor to police in Ukraine that was never delivered.

Mr. Cardillo agreed to repay the money but has not, Mr. Bogachek's lawyer said. Mr. Cardillo declined to discuss his work with Mr. Grenell, saying only that "they were private equity deals in the private sector and had nothing whatsoever to do with any public interest."

Mr. Grenell has worked hard to aid not only Mr. Trump but also his family. He helped Melania Trump secure \$500,000 for two speeches on two consecutive days in 2022, including one for Fix California, an election integrity and voter engagement group Mr. Grenell founded in 2021. Last month, Mr. Grenell introduced the former first lady at a Log Cabin Republicans fund-raiser at Mar-a-Lago. He has publicly lauded Mr. Trump's daughter Ivanka as the first White House official to recognize Mr. Grenell's status as America's first gay cabinet member.

In an episode not previously reported, Mr. Grenell proposed last year an idea to underscore Mr. Trump's complaints that the indictments sought by the special counsel, Jack Smith, were political. Mr. Grenell suggested that Mr. Trump join him on a visit to the former Kosovo president and prime minister, Hashim Thaci, in prison in The Hague, where he awaits trial on war crimes charges. Mr. Thaci was also indicted by Mr. Smith, who oversaw war crimes prosecutions in The Hague before he was named special counsel. Mr. Thaci has said politics underlie the charges against him.

Mr. Trump did not embrace Mr. Grenell's idea. A person close to Mr. Thaci said he found the idea of Mr. Trump and a raucous media scrum in front of The Hague Penitentiary Institution amusing — but decided it would be best to focus on his own case.

Mr. Grenell has posted suggestions on social media that Mr. Thaci's indictment was a Justice Department-led conspiracy.

A Rocky Road to Trump World



Mr. Grenell onstage at the Republican National Convention in 2020. Pete Marovich for The New York Times

Mr. Grenell's route to the Trump White House was circuitous. He grew up in Jenison, Mich., graduated from Evangel University, a Christian college in Springfield, Mo., received a master's degree from Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government and held a half-dozen political communications jobs before landing in 2001 at the U.S. mission to the United Nations.

There he served as spokesman for four U.S. ambassadors to the U.N., including John R. Bolton, who later became Mr. Trump's national security adviser. Immersed in floor debate and policy meetings, Mr. Grenell fielded reporters' inquiries during the fraught years after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and built a reputation for testy, sometimes explosive, responses to queries and stories he disliked.

Jobless after Barack Obama won the presidency in 2008, he eventually founded Capitol Media Partners, a communications firm that advertised a presence in several major cities. In reality, Mr. Grenell and his business partner, Mr. Chase, worked from their homes in Southern California. Mr. Grenell became an early and vitriolic Twitter user who insulted journalists, celebrities and politicians. He denigrated the appearance of women, including two former secretaries of state — Hillary Clinton and Madeleine Albright — and the MSNBC anchor Rachel Maddow.

Capitol Media had clients with interests in Iran, Kenya, Congo, Moldova, Afghanistan and Somalia, according to archived versions of its website. “A huge amount of it was media relations,” Mr. Chase said. “Whatever the cause was, we were communicating it to every major stakeholder,” such as investors, regulators and public officials.

In 2012, Mr. Grenell began a long-running animus with Ms. Rice, then President Obama’s U.N. ambassador. He helped tank her nomination to be secretary of state by pointing out her support for Rwanda’s president, Paul Kagame, who was sponsoring violence in the neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo.



Mr. Grenell at the United Nations headquarters in 2006, while serving as spokesman for Ambassador John Bolton. Mr. Grenell fielded reporters' inquiries in the years after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and built a reputation for testy responses. David Karp/Associated Press

That same year, Mr. Grenell and Mr. Chase pitched an Iranian dissident, Alireza Jafarzadeh, on a plan to pay them between \$15,000 and \$25,000 a month to “help influence change for Iran” among elected officials and “other key audiences,” according to a copy of a Capitol Media Partners proposal. Mr. Jafarzadeh was a Washington-based representative for the Iranian resistance group known as the Mujahedeen Khalq, or the M.E.K., which in 2012 was campaigning to be removed from the State Department’s list of foreign terrorist organizations.

There was already a crowded field of American politicians working for the group, among them Rudolph W. Giuliani, who pushed the State Department to revoke M.E.K.’s terrorist listing, which it did in September 2012. It is unclear exactly what

Mr. Grenell did for Mr. Jafarzadeh, or how much he was paid. Mr. Grenell would not comment, and Mr. Jafarzadeh would only say in a recent interview that he has had “no work-related relationship with Mr. Grenell for over a decade.”

Mr. Grenell’s next stop was brief. In a stint as a foreign policy spokesman for Mitt Romney’s 2012 presidential campaign, he lasted only two weeks amid scrutiny of his social media posts, the most scathing of which he apologized for, and hundreds of which he deleted. Though Mr. Romney’s advisers urged him to stay, Mr. Grenell quit, angering his allies on the campaign, who say he cast homophobia on the far right as the reason for his departure, two of those allies said.

Mr. Grenell began the 2016 campaign as a fierce Trump critic: He called him “dangerous!” in a deleted tweet recovered by Politico and the cybersecurity firm Nisos. But after Mr. Trump won the nomination, Mr. Grenell became a high-profile booster, aided by his work as a paid commentator on Fox News. That same year, Mr. Grenell’s company was paid \$103,750 by a foundation mostly funded by Hungary’s far-right government, and he wrote opinion essays, which he has said were unpaid, defending a Moldovan oligarch who was put under sanctions by the State Department for corruption.

By 2018, Mr. Trump had nominated him to be his U.S. ambassador to Germany. Within weeks of arriving in Berlin, Mr. Grenell drew condemnation from both sides of the Atlantic after telling Breitbart London that he wanted to empower European conservative leaders who challenged “the failed policies of the left.”

Mr. Grenell’s comments so obliterated the neutrality expected of a diplomat that Martin Schulz, the former president of the European Parliament and a former leader of Germany’s Social Democratic Party, called his behavior more like that of a “far-right colonial officer.” In Washington, Senator Christopher S. Murphy, Democrat of Connecticut, deemed the remarks “awful.”



Mr. Grenell was confirmed as the U.S. ambassador to Germany in 2018. He made headlines in the diplomatic post for his vocal support for right-wing parties in Europe. Bernd von Jutrczenka/picture alliance, via Getty Images

Mr. Grenell plunged ahead. He gave interviews about his dog, hosted gatherings in the embassy residence and at the 2019 Munich Security Conference appeared on a panel with Stuart Milk, the nephew of the slain gay rights activist Harvey Milk, to call on some 70 countries to repeal laws that treat L.G.B.T.Q. people as criminals.

“It’s not lip service,” said Miriam Richter, the Harvey Milk Foundation’s general counsel. “It’s something he feels very strongly about.” (Other L.G.B.T.Q. groups have a much harsher view of his advocacy.)

In 2020, Mr. Trump named Mr. Grenell to temporarily replace the acting director of national intelligence, Joseph Maguire, who Mr. Trump had fired. Senate Democrats responded by requesting that the Justice Department investigate whether Mr. Grenell had violated the Foreign Agents Registration Act, or FARA, which

generally requires that people disclose work in the U.S. on behalf of foreign governments. The letter cited Mr. Grenell's work for Hungary and the Moldovan oligarch, and noted that he had not registered under FARA.

It is unclear what became of the request — the Justice Department declined to comment — but Mr. Grenell was never meant to be a permanent intelligence chief. He was replaced after three months by Representative John Ratcliffe, a Texas Republican, who won confirmation after Democrats concluded that although he was as partisan as Mr. Grenell, he was far less toxic.

During his weeks in the post, Mr. Grenell fired top officials and oversaw a wave of document declassifications aimed at discrediting the U.S. intelligence community's assessment of Russia's pro-Trump machinations in the 2016 campaign.

Mr. Trump was pleased.

"I think you'll go down as the all-time great 'acting' ever, at any position," Mr. Trump said at Mr. Grenell's last cabinet meeting.

In late 2020, eager for a diplomatic coup in the final days before the presidential election, Mr. Trump dispatched Mr. Grenell on a mission that has flummoxed Western diplomats for a decade: To try to coax Serbia into recognizing Kosovo, a majority-Albanian former province, as an independent state. Mr. Grenell courted regional leaders, largely ignoring American and European Union diplomats who had worked on the issue for years.

Confident of a deal, Mr. Grenell proposed renaming an industrial reservoir bridging Kosovo and Serbia "Trump Lake" to memorialize his achievement. But negotiations failed after the war crimes tribunal in The Hague announced plans to indict Mr. Thaci, the Kosovo president. Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo, increasingly fractious, still call the lake by two different names, neither of which is Trump.

Kenneth P. Vogel, Eric Lipton and Glenn Thrush contributed reporting from Washington. Kitty Bennett contributed research.

A correction was made on May 28, 2024: An earlier version of this article misstated a familial connection of an L.G.B.T.Q. activist, Stuart Milk. He is Harvey Milk's nephew, not his brother.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nynews@nytimes.com. Learn more

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